



AAC Publications

Avalanche — Inexperience, Inadequate Gear

Washington, Stuart Range, Alpine Lakes Wilderness, Colchuck Peak

The Northeast Couloir of Colchuck Peak rises through the center of the face. Four climbers were carried to the bottom of the couloir in an avalanche triggered when they were in the vicinity of the yellow circle in February 2023. Three perished. Photo: Matt Primomo, Northwest Avalanche Center

At 1:15 p.m. on February 19, a slab avalanche killed three climbers: Seong Cho (54), Jeannie Lee (60), and Yun Park (66). They were attempting the Northeast Couloir of Colchuck Peak in a team of six when the avalanche occurred.

At the time of the accident, the team was traveling unroped on the 1,500-foot, Grade II snow climb. Reports indicate the slab avalanche was triggered by the lead climber and entrained four of the five climbers below. The slide carried the climbers approximately 500 feet down the narrow couloir. All of the falling climbers remained on the surface but sustained traumatic injuries. Unfortunately, for three of the climbers, those injuries proved fatal. The surviving climber, with lower-extremity injuries, was assisted 1,000 feet down to the team's base camp by the remaining two team members.

The team members reported that multiple additional avalanches swept the couloir following the initial slide. These subsequent avalanches buried two of the deceased climbers' bodies. The surviving team members hiked out five miles to make contact with rescue personnel at 8 a.m. on February 20. Persistent avalanche danger made immediate recovery of the bodies unsafe for rescuers.

ANALYSIS

On February 18, the local avalanche center issued a "moderate" danger rating for the zone surrounding Colchuck Peak. "Moderate" danger (the second-highest of five levels) is defined as conditions when natural avalanches are unlikely but human-triggered avalanches are possible. The avalanche danger was expected to rise to "high" by that evening, and a significant risk of upper-elevation wind slab was highlighted in the avalanche report.

Between February 16 and 19, weather stations in the East Central zone recorded moderate to strong westerly winds. On the morning of the 19th, the party reported light snowfall, becoming heavier as they ascended. An incoming winter storm began to impact the area with increasingly strong west-northwest winds during the afternoon. The winds resulted in blowing snow that likely deposited slabs on lee aspects and scoured windward slopes in the days and hours leading up to the avalanche.

This team of climbers had been in the field, without communications devices, for multiple days and did not have access to this report. Based on subsequent interviews, none of the climbers was wearing an avalanche beacon nor had received formal avalanche training. Three of the four climbers who were caught and carried were not wearing helmets. The survivor was wearing a helmet. While it is not certain how helmets influenced the result of this incident, wearing a helmet provides additional protection against traumatic brain injuries.

A longtime local mountain guide made the observation after this incident that traveling in large groups in restricted terrain, such as this couloir, carries additional risk. Narrow snow climbs are often bordered by rocky terrain that can cause additional trauma and have variable snow depths where weak snow layers can be easily triggered. Climbers should consider avalanche potential and

corresponding mitigation strategies before attempting any snow climb. (Sources: Northwest Avalanche Center, UPI, and Climbing.com.)

Images



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